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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 000142

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [ASEC](#) [PTER](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: THE NEW PEOPLE'S ARMY POSTURING IN ADVANCE OF
BILATERAL EXERCISE

REF: 2008 MANILA 1795: THE NEW PEOPLE'S ARMY: DOWN
BUT NOT OUT

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney;
for reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: The New People's Army (NPA) continues to pose a security challenge to Philippine military and law enforcement agencies, but although the NPA remains active in several provinces, its capacity to wage effective attacks against the government is diminishing on a national scale. In response to joint U.S.-Philippine civil-military activities that will be conducted as part of Balikatan 2009 in the Bicol region of central Philippines, the NPA recently issued statements warning that local residents should not be fooled by these "humanitarian missions" and called for "tactical offensives" to disrupt the bilateral exercise. While both Embassy and Philippine government personnel have interpreted the statements as directed at the Philippine military, local media have mischaracterized the statements as aimed at U.S. forces who will be participating in Balikatan. The NPA, whose support among the vast majority of Filipinos has waned considerably over the last few years, is thought to still have strong support in some isolated areas, including the Bicol region, and may be using the media attention traditionally associated with the annual Balikatan exercises to call attention to the NPA cause. U.S. force protection personnel continue to monitor the situation in Bicol and other areas that will host Balikatan activities, but at this time have not determined that the NPA poses a significant threat to U.S. military personnel who will take part in the exercise. END SUMMARY.

NPA DANGEROUS, BUT NOT THREATENING USG

12. (C) Over the past several years, the New People's Army has lost much of its ability to conduct sustained military operations but, in several regions, remains capable of conducting lethal attacks against both Philippine law enforcement and military personnel (reftel), along with extorting local businesses in pursuit of payment of "revolutionary taxes." According to the Philippine military, since August 2008, the NPA has killed more than two dozen persons and conducted at least 250 attacks throughout the Philippines against the government and businesses. In early January 2009, the NPA claimed responsibility for a roadside bomb that wounded the governor of Masbate Province in central Philippines, but denied the attack was directed at the governor, saying the bombs were intended for the police who were traveling with her.

13. (C) The Masbate attack comes on the heels of the NPA labeling upcoming civil-military operations that will take place in Bicol and surrounding regions during the Balikatan U.S.-Philippine joint military exercise as an excuse for "spying on the revolutionary movement." The NPA also claimed there are no terrorist groups in the region and no "calamities" which would necessitate the need for humanitarian activities. Press reporting mischaracterized the NPA's statements as calling for action against U.S. forces that would participate in the humanitarian activities, an assertion that both Embassy and Philippine government personnel discount. Since 2001, the NPA has not made direct threats against the U.S. government or military, but instead has directed its actions against Philippine military and law enforcement agencies, accusing them of being "puppets" of the United States.

NPA RHETORIC RELATIVELY LOW KEY

14. (C) Despite their recent allegations warning the local Bicol populace about the "true intentions" of the Balikatan-related humanitarian activities, so far the NPA's rhetoric has been low-key regarding the annual bilateral military exercise. USG and Philippine observers believe the NPA is trying to influence less militant organizations that have historically been sympathetic to their message, but may have shied away from openly aligning with a group that continues to use violence as its primary method to settle disputes.

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15. (C) For its part, the Philippine government has attempted to de-escalate the rhetoric regarding its activities against the NPA, although President Arroyo and other top elected and military officials have not backed away from their publicly-declared intent to defeat the NPA by 2010, the end of President Arroyo's administration (reftel). While recent statistics indicate that the NPA-led attacks over the past few months continue to cause more fatalities and damage than Islamist terrorist groups such as Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyah, the NPA may be capitalizing on a Philippine military that has competing security responsibilities. Since August 2008 -- when rogue commanders of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) attacked military units and civilians in central Mindanao -- the government has shifted troops from the central Philippines to Mindanao as the Armed Forces of the Philippines continue to conduct military operations against rogue MILF elements. This period corresponds with an up-tick in NPA activity for certain areas of the country. The USS Pelilieu visited Bicol in 2007 and the crew joined Ambassador and Embassy staff in hosting a very well attended July 4 celebration on board.

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BALIKATAN ACTIVITIES PART OF BROADER ENGAGEMENT
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16. (C) The Mission, particularly USAID, has been very active in the Bicol region for years. In the aftermath of a typhoon which devastated the provinces of Albay and Camarines Sur in 2006, USAID provided more than USD 5 million in support of reconstruction activities -- including building 1,000 new homes and three community centers -- while also implementing local disaster preparedness training. USAID has also focused on improving the quality of health care in the region by assisting in developing new health care strategies for families and improving existing medical programs for children, all of which has contributed to the NPA's waning influence in the Bicol region.

COMMENT

17. (C) At this point, the Mission believes that the NPA's statements and the media's portrayal of Balikatan are designed to rouse the small but influential group of elites who routinely criticize U.S. military activities in the Philippines. Building on USAID's existing presence in the region, the Mission has begun reaching out to local and regional officials in preparation for Balikatan 2009. By initiating meetings with members of Congress, mayors, and governors, as well as implementing an integrated and robust public affairs posture with the Philippine government, the Mission's proactive engagement prior to Balikatan will ensure that local leaders and residents are well-informed about the many benefits Balikatan will bring to the region, thus thwarting false accusations and misleading statements by the NPA and others.

KENNEY